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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: WHY ENGLISH MATTERS

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: English Language programs continue to play a vital role in achieving Embassy Ashgabat's MSP goals of assisting civil society development and promoting democratic and economic reforms in a predominantly Muslim country in which the government severely curtails educational opportunities and free speech, and cultural space is still dominated by adulation of the President and official state ideology. Demand for English language programs continues to increase and is far higher than what is available domestically. Post's English programming remains critical to long-term engagement with the Turkmen government and people. With the removal of Russian as the primary language of instruction in schools and higher educational institutions, English language acquisition has become a top priority for local citizens who wish to gain access to better-paid jobs, educational opportunities abroad, and access to unbiased media. END SUMMARY.

FREE ENGLISH CLASSES FALL FAR SHORT OF DEMAND IN THE CAPITAL

13. (U) English language is becoming increasingly popular with the Turkmen population, and post is doing its best to meet the demand and satisfy interest. In early 2008, Post started its first free PAS-run 5-month English language courses for about 100 students total. The course was taught through a PAS grant in the total amount of \$1,383 to an Amcit, Hungarian-educated English teacher. The program continued and expanded in the fall of 2008 with the involvement of post's English Language Fellow, Sherie Henderson, and a local teacher, a JFDP alumna, teaching now more than 100 students at the cost of \$5,685 per year. In January 2009, four more teachers (two American teachers paid through a grant and two volunteer EFM American teachers) started giving classes to an additional 235 students. The program was announced only in PAS and more than 500 people applied. Due to the limited space and number of teachers, post was able to enroll only 235. Overall, currently, PAS has around 350 students learning English through these two grant programs. Every day, PAS receives numerous calls from local citizens asking how they can enroll in English programs. These programs only operate in the capital and post is aware of significant demand throughout Turkmenistan.

"HELLO FRIENDS" - POST'S TV PROGRAM FOR LEARNING ENGLISH

14. (SBU) The Turkmenistan government turned down proposals for broadcasting existing English-learning programs on tightly controlled, state-owned Turkmen TV. Therefore, starting in the fall of 2007, PAS came up with an idea to start running a locally-developed English language and American Studies TV program, called "Salam Dostlar" or "Hello, Friends" designed specifically for Turkmen audiences. PAS, an English Language Fellow, and a local private video studio worked on the program design and started airing the weekly Sunday program in March 2008. The program is extremely

successful, and is, according to some, the only program worth watching on state TV. PAS also distributed 1000 copies of a DVD with the first 10 episodes in the fall of 2008 and an additional 500 DVDs of the following 10 episodes in early 2009. With only \$16,000 contributed to this project, the U.S. Embassy was able to be the first non-Turkmen source to broadcast a regular program on Turkmen TV, attracting thousands of viewers every week and teaching English language and American culture at the same time. All the scripts and lesson plans are designed in-house by PD staff and post's ELF. PD staff and FLEX alumni are the principal actors as well, bringing real, everyday spoken American English and insight into American culture to Turkmen audiences through TV.

#### ENGLISH LANGUAGE FELLOW

15. (SBU) Post enjoys hosting an English Language Fellow each academic year in Ashgabat, who is co-hosted by the Supreme Council for Science and Technology and PAS this year. The ELF's guidance and expertise is invaluable for PAS Ashgabat's numerous English language programs. Currently, ELF Janet Adams teaches Intermediate English to two groups of graduate students and a conversation class to a group of scholars at the Supreme Council, Intermediate English to two groups of students at PAS, and Business English to a group of entrepreneurs through a democracy alumni outreach grant which funds a Business Center. PAS continually receives inquiries for an ELF at several other projects; having one ELF in Ashgabat is not enough. Post has been struggling to get a second ELF to host in a major city outside the capital, with no success. Despite the approval and funding allocated for the requested two slots two years in a row, it is almost impossible to find applicants to fill both slots. Post hopes to be able to host at least two fellows in order to meet

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requests for a long-term specialist or other consultations on English language learning.

#### FULBRIGHT AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE SPECIALISTS

16. (SBU) In order to fill the gap, post tried to host ELSPECs and FULSPECs in the past, but this year the cost-sharing requirement of both programs prevented post from applying and requesting them, because of the scarcity of funds. Turkmen host institutions do not have any resources to contribute in bringing the specialist and those which fall under the Ministry of Education are often unable to openly cooperate with Embassy programs. The first FULSPEC Deborah Norland, a TEFL professor, conducted an highly successful program at the Turkmen State University's English Language Department in late 2008, and would like to come back, but post does not have any means to follow-up on this program.

#### ANNUAL CATEC (CENTRAL ASIAN TEACHERS OF ENGLISH CONFERENCE)

17. (SBU) Another successful and critical annual event that definitely deserves support is the Central Asian Teachers of English Conference, which gathers at least 100 English teachers from Central Asia for two to three days to learn from each other and from American specialists. Funding has always been an issue, and can limit the number of participating teachers and the diversity of those who attend. This conference is one way to help otherwise isolated Central Asian countries to integrate and share common problems and interests. For Turkmenistan, this conference is also critical because of the almost complete absence of any other retraining or certification programs for English teachers to keep up-to-date with the current EFL teaching trends and methodologies. Turkmen teachers are extremely isolated often by their own Ministry of Education, and the need for professional development is dire.

#### ACCESS ENGLISH MICROSCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

18. (SBU) Given the absence of traditional extracurricular activities for youth through the schools, the ACCESS program in Turkmenistan provides much more than simply English language training - and thus serves as an integral component of Post's public diplomacy efforts. Post has developed creative methods to implement English language programs, often involving substantive integration of the arts and sports and the active participation Turkmenistan's USG exchange

programs alumni. The ACCESS program enables us to reach out to more youth in Turkmenistan and exposes more youth to American and English Language studies in a country where educational opportunities are severely limited but where demand for such programming is great. Access English Microscholarship program is very successful in Turkmenistan, currently having 75 students learning English in 4 major cities of Turkmenistan, with more than 100 alumni. More than a dozen of Access alumni were chosen and participated in FLEX High School Exchange program, and further continued their studies at American Universities in the US, or AUCA and others. Many others were able to enroll at universities abroad, and all thanks to their participation in Access Microscholarship program. For the cost of about \$20-\$30 a month per student, this program really gives a hope and an opportunity for change to most of these otherwise underprivileged and disadvantaged children. More on ACCESS will be provided septel.

#### WHY ARE ALL THE EFFORTS NEEDED?

¶9. (SBU). Post is facing difficulties with finding qualified applicants with adequate English skills for USG exchange programs, especially the degree and research programs. Although English is gradually being introduced to all schools and higher educational institutions, with no adequate teacher training, revised textbooks, authentic materials, or engagement with native speakers, the goal of the Turkmen Education Ministry to develop fluent English speakers has thus far been a failure. It is also difficult to host US Fulbright researchers and scholars at Turkmen institutions because of the lack of English speakers. Therefore, Embassy-hosted English programs focused on teaching English and training English teachers is essential for the adequate number of applicants who can speak English well enough to apply for a rigorous academic program.

¶10. (SBU). Because of the government's focus on Turkmen as a national language, and its limits on other sources of information and education, the majority of Turkmen citizens are fairly isolated and limited in educational and professional opportunities. This is a serious issue with the new generation of Turkmen, who completed fully "Turkmenized" secondary schools after 2005. These are students who graduate speaking only Turkmen, and who were raised

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under the Niyazov-era of minimal education. It is extremely important for post to be able to engage these generations of new school graduates, who are vulnerable to biased or even extremist views. This is also important to support efforts of the new Turkmen presidency to bring international standards and international experience to Turkmen practices in all spheres and help Turkmenistan integrate into the international community.

#### RUSSIAN MEDIA AND VIEWS DOMINATE

¶11. (SBU) Bringing up good English speakers is essential for counteracting Russian propaganda, received through Russian satellite TV - the primary source of alternative information or entertainment for locals. The often anti-American, anti-Western bias of these outlets exerts a strong influence on Turkmen views. Many either watch Russian channels themselves or hear from their Russian-speaking relatives or neighbors who rely on this alternative to the limited information available in state media. Therefore it is critical to develop English language skills among Turkmen to be able to provide them access to other TV or Radio channels, broadcast in English.

#### WHAT RESOURCES ARE NEEDED?

¶13. With such a great need, post could easily share one more Central Asian RELO, and a local English language programs coordinator-FSN would definitely be a great asset to support existing programs, as well as to expand the English language programs. More funds for programs like the "Hello, Friends" TV program, English courses, especially those run in the regions, resources for teacher-training, more funds for procuring English language learning books and programs for the American Corners, IRC, other resource centers, and higher educational institutions, as well as funds for the revision of the local English language textbooks at secondary schools and

higher educational institutions. Post would appreciate funding to host ELSPECs and FULSPECs, as well as English Language Fellows. Absent a coordinated or competent Government of Turkmenistan policy to improve English Language learning, Embassy resources remain one of the most significant English language learning options for the average Turkmen citizen.

MILES